

The Art of Oral History: How to Conduct an Oral History Session

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Part I: What is oral history?

Ostensibly, oral histories are in-depth interviews used to capture a given experience and first-hand accounts of a historical event or time period.

Whereas many interviews are designed to collect quotes or a snapshot of experience; the oral history is all about taking a journey through a person's life and career. Oral history questions are designed to encourage the participant to reflect back and share that narrative of their life's journey. It is no surprise that in the oral history field, the interviewee is often called the "Narrator."

In the end, after the oral history interview is completed and transcribed you have a precious document—a primary source that adds complexion and soul to the sometimes soulless historical fact and happenstance

As products, oral histories can be adapted into articles, blogs, podcasts and serve as the basis of books, and command and hospital histories.

Part II: Origin of Project

Over the last thirty years, the BUMED History Component has operated a very active oral history program. To date we have conducted over 400 oral history interviews with everyone from veterans of wars, astronauts, White House Medical personnel, leaders—people from all aspects of the Navy Medicine Enterprise, all ranks and ratings, active duty, retired and reserve and specialty.

The program was started by Mr. Jan Herman, former BUMED Historian (1979-2012) who realized that so many experiences were being lost or forgotten. His early focus was the World War II "greatest generation"—people like Pharmacist's Mate First Class Wheeler Lipes, a corpsman who performed a life-saving appendectomy aboard a submarine in enemy waters; members of the Navy Beach Battalion whose role in the Normandy Invasion was overlooked by many historians; and the Navy medical POWs of World War II.

The rich repository of interview transcripts would be excerpted in *Navy Medicine* magazine from the 1980s through early 2000s and ultimately be collected and released as the book *Battle Station Sick Bay: Navy Medicine in World War II* (1997). In turn, these WWII interviews were rerecorded on video and would spawn a six-part documentary film series, *Navy Medicine at War*.

In the 1990s, the focus on World War II veterans shifted to the Korean War and later

Vietnam. These interviews would in turn serve as the basis of oral history books on the Korean War and Vietnam. Both are excellent reads and a treasure trove of Navy medical experience during the trying years of war.

Since 2001, the BUMED History Component has focused on capturing more active duty experiences. After September 11th, the Naval History and Heritage Command commissioned us to conduct oral history sessions with first-responders at the Pentagon, local civilian medical providers who took care of the injured, as well as the personnel who sailed to New York aboard USNS *Comfort*.

Over the last decade we have conducted sessions with OEF/OIF personnel, scientist, present-day innovators and leaders. The goal is nothing less than to build an “encyclopedia of experience” for all of Navy Medicine so that future generations of officers and sailors, researchers and scholars may grasp an understanding of how an organization functioned, why something happened, and who made it happen.

Part III: How do you know who to interview?

Some of the best leads are often through word of mouth, and friends of friends. We believe that despite the experience everyone has a good story and there is always value in every oral history session. Once you identify the prospective interviewee there is a simple process to follow.

Step 1. Send the prospective participant an invitation and provide a background of the project. Invitations can generally be sent through e-mail, but in certain circumstances written letters or cold calls will work. A follow-up call or e-mail is sometimes in order. You should never intrude on the participant’s personal space if you do not receive a reply. Some people are not interested or ready to tell their stories and sometimes they are too polite to say “no.”

Step 2. Once interview has been accepted schedule a date of session and time/place. Provide participant a selection of dates to choose from.

Step 3. Be as prepared as possible. Ask for a copy of the participant’s CV or biography, if available. Research the context of their career as much as possible.

Step 4. Conduct the session. Define the length of the session beforehand. The interview session can be exhausting for the participant and the interviewer.

Step 5. All participants should sign an Access Agreement which gives the interviewer the right to archive the final transcript, make it available for researchers, or use it for their research, etc.

Step 6. After the session follow prepare transcript and/or audio files. Provide copy of transcript or audio file to participant for their own records.

Step 7. If you are working with a transcript clean it up transcript before returning it to participant (i.e., iron out syntax, remove redundant words/phrases, clean up transcript errors, ensure accuracy of statements, add footnotes, and highlight any passages that are unclear). A draft can then be sent to the participant for their review. Always give the participant the chance to review and modify the transcript to their liking.

Part IV: A Few Keys for the Interview Session

1. Be informed—don't go cold turkey into the session—know the direction you want to go.
2. Draft a rough list of questions beforehand. Questions should be designed to encourage participant to tell their stories.
3. Remember the interview is not about the interviewer and you should not try to break them like a Mike Wallace interview. There is no "J'accuse" moment. The less the oral historian is talking the better. A perfect model for this is Dick Cavett or Studs Terkel. You have to gently guide them to tell THEIR story.
4. It is important to listen to what the participant is saying and allow them to tell the stories at their own pace.
5. Be an enthusiastic listener, but try not to interrupt or disrupt the narrative.
6. Finally, it is important to know how to operate the recording devices beforehand.